

# JEEVADHARA

# The Meeting of Religions

**RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**

Editor:

**John B. Chethimattam**

Theology Centre

Kottayam - 686 017

Kerala, India

## CONTENTS

	<i>Pages</i>
Editorial	350
Christian Theology and other Religions <i>John B. Chethimattam</i>	353
The Rhetoric of Intrareligious Dialogue <i>Raimundo Panikkar</i>	367
The Religious Experience of Pseudo-Dionysius <i>Wayne Teasdale</i>	381
The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Early Christian Tradition <i>J. Dupuis</i>	393

# Editorial

Religious pluralism has always been a fact in the world. In the past it was considered an anomaly, a problem that would go away with the conversion of all men to the "true religion". When European culture reached its climax and the British power its zenith before the first World War there were people like Farquahr who claimed that with the present facility for communication of ideas among men all religions of the world have been sufficiently exposed and examined and that under that objective scrutiny only one religion, i. e. Christianity could survive since the others would soon be disappearing by their own internal contradictions. But this simplistic approach to religions is now generally abandoned. Today we have to face the fact that the different religions are here to stay and the followers of different religions have to live with one another accepting each other with their differing religious beliefs and traditions. Hence Christian theologians have to face religious pluralism in the world as a challenge, explain its meaning and examine the possibility of reconciling the missionary efforts to bring all men to the knowledge of Christ and the experience of his salvation with the ongoing dialogue with men of other faiths in sincerity and mutual understanding.

But it is easier to explain what types of pluralism are inadmissible for a true believer and seeker of truth than to define positively the admissible pluralistic modes. It will be a naive oversimplification to say that all religions are the same or equal like rivers flowing into the same ocean. This will be to ignore the actual difference between different religions which sometimes do differ even in vital principles and interpretations of fundamental realities of human life. Equally unacceptable is a purely relativistic approach to religions in the sense that each religion is best for those who follow it and that each one is saved in the religion of his choice. This would be to ignore the various historical and sociological circumstances in which individuals become followers of certain religions as if by chance without any rational thought or choice.

It is true that religions are accepted by their followers as guides providing answers to the profound mysteries of human life, its nature, meaning, purpose and ultimate destiny. It is also true that religions have not focussed their attention on the same truths but different religions have stressed different aspects and approaches that are often complementary than contradictory. Some have emphasized God's call to men for supernatural fellowship and eternal happiness, while others stress the experience of the divine reality in the human heart. For some social order and



temporal prosperity are the signs of divine government in human affairs while others start with the fact of human bondage and ignorance. Since these different considerations are all true and basic to human life these different emphases should be taken as complementary than competitive or contradictory. As systems of beliefs, norms of conduct, and cultic rites, and as historically conditioned traditions religions can never claim to be absolutes, and so they require an ongoing dialogue among themselves to throw light on each other's blind spots and neglected concerns. Raimundo Panikkar discusses in his article presented in this issue of *Jeevadhara* the different dimensions of this "intrareligious" dialogue.

But the examination of religions should not be to reduce all religions to their common denominator, however crucial and fundamental that denominator be. If a person thinks of his Christian faith as one religion among many and is ready to find it in every faith and every tradition, for him Christianity would be one humanizing religion among many and it would not matter much whether it continued to exist or disappeared from the face of the earth. The uniqueness of Christianity is what makes her mission to all men meaningful and relevant. J. Dupuis discusses the meaning of this uniqueness in Christianity's encounter with other religions. My own contribution in this issue is to examine the Catholic theologian's task in this complex situation. Today different paradigms drawn from the historical, metaphysical, psychological and sociological perspectives are available to him to understand the complementarity of religions. Religious pluralism presents an opportunity to liberate the individual from the arbitrary burdens laid on him by his own particular religious tradition, even long after those particular customs and regulations had lost their purpose and meaning. Different religions also direct the theologian's attention to the basic human problems today that they should endeavour to resolve and call for adjustment in the theological venture requiring new perspectives, attitudes and hermeneutical tools. A model is presented in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, an unknown author coming from a Neo-Platonist background and trying to interpret Christian faith in that perspective. Wayne Teasdale explains the theological experience of Dionysius.

Today the task of the Christian theologian is not merely to make a new synthesis of old masters but rather to face the new situation of humanity and its problems and examine the meaning of his Christian faith to the present world in the context of World Religions.

# Christian Theology and other Religions

## Issues and orientations

Christian theology is undergoing today a twofold challenge, one from the side of science and technology and the concrete and practical approach to life and ethics they have introduced, and the other from the emergence into human consciousness of several non-Christian religions. Modern scientific experience has brought home to all that the data, methodology and conclusions of the empirical sciences like those of physics, chemistry, biology, psychology and history have very much to contribute to the religious self-understanding of man, his value system and basic concerns. Similarly with the reemergence into international prominence of long suppressed cultures and peoples as new independent nations, their ancient religious traditions and thought patterns are imposing themselves on the human mind today and demanding new modes of experience and expression to bring out their special religious emphases. Against these two new thrusts of modern experience Christian theological reaction has variously ranged between the two extremes of either denying all relevance to these new avenues to experience as far as Faith is concerned, or of embracing them wholeheartedly to the extent of denying any actual relevance to traditional Christian theology as far as modern man is concerned. Very little effort has been made to face this new situation with the inner logic of theology itself through a re-examination of its presuppositions and attitudes. I shall indicate here a few ambiguities in the contemporary Christian attitude to non-Christian religions, and these ambivalent attitudes require careful consideration by theologians lest theology should become a closed and irrelevant doctrinaire cut off from the actual issues of life and experience.

## Ambivalent approach of Vatican II

We have left behind in comparing Christianity to other religions the trite classical polarities like truth vs. falsehood,



perfect vs. imperfect, fulfilment vs. expectation, and supernatural vs. natural. Still, the feeling of superiority for one's own religious tradition which created these polarities has not been got over with. According to Vatican II, to these world religions men look for answers to the profound mysteries of human life, like the nature, meaning and purpose of human life, distinction between goodness and sin, value of suffering, and especially the ultimate and unutterable mystery which engulfs our being.<sup>1</sup> It also takes note of the specific contribution made by major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam in refining concepts and providing a developed language in solving the major religious problems.<sup>2</sup> None the less, it recognizes in the rules and teachings of other religions only a reflection of a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men<sup>3</sup>, and not the presence of that Truth itself. They are rather grudgingly given the credit for "preserving in their traditions precious elements of religion and humanity".<sup>4</sup> Similarly emphasizing the need for introducing the seminarians to the study of other religions the scope is stated as "better understand the elements of goodness and truth which such religions possess by God's providence" and "disprove the errors in them".<sup>5</sup> On the whole Vatican II in viewing other religions follows the pessimism of St. Paul, as if by a general rule other religions have become caught up in futile reasoning and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the creator.<sup>6</sup> Hence the main purpose of the Church with regard to other religions is said to be salvaging "whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples".<sup>7</sup>

But this pessimistic attitude towards other religions accords ill with certain basic facts recognized by the Council in other documents and contexts. First of all the Church recognizes that it is not the author or principal agent of human salvation but only a humble means in the working of divine providence. Hence for the Church "missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than a manifestation or epiphany of God's will and the ful-

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1) Vatican II. *Nostra Aetate* 1.

2) *Ibid.* 2

3) *Ibid.*

4) *Gaudium et Spes* 92

5) *Optatum Totius* 16, 6.

6) *Lumen Gentium* 16,4

7) *Ibid.* 17,3

filment of that will in the world and in world history".<sup>8</sup> Salvation is the work of the Spirit of God who opens the hearts to faith and sets them on the spiritual journey.<sup>9</sup> Hence forcing anyone to embrace the faith or alluring or enticing people by unworthy techniques or accepting people who come with improper motives contradicts the basic meaning of evangelization.<sup>10</sup> The document on religious freedom recognizes as a basic principle: "Truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power".<sup>11</sup> "Of its very nature the exercise of religion consists before all else in those internal, voluntary, and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly towards God."<sup>12</sup> Organized religion is the external expression given to these internal acts in accordance with the social nature of man. These external religious expressions "transcend by their very nature the order of terrestrial and temporal affairs".<sup>13</sup> The Church believes that the one true religion, the one in which men serve God in the way made known to mankind by God himself, "subsists in the catholic and apostolic Church".<sup>14</sup> But this does not give the Church any right to judge other religions as erroneous or to downgrade them as imperfect, since by her own admission they are the honest and spontaneous social expression of the experience of the Spirit working in the hearts of men inspiring and guiding them. Actually we are presented with two modes or orders of the working out of salvation, both originating from God: one starts from man's interior experience of the Spirit working within through inspiration and illumination and demanding an adequate external and social activity and organization. The other, on the other hand, starts with the external and historical self-disclosure of God in a particular people indicating the way people should worship God and attain salvation and calling for internal acceptance of his activity in history through faith. The moment both these modes are recognized as authentically divine, to claim superiority for one over the other or postulate a mechanical infallibility for the external authority and deny it to those who are led from within by the Spirit of God would be to deny the fundamental principles on which these insights are based.

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8) *Ad Gentes* 9

10) *Ibid.*

12) *Ibid.* 2

14) *Ibid.* 1

9) *Ibid.* 13

11) *Dignitatis Humanae* 1

13) *Ibid.*



### Place and meaning of structures

Perhaps the principal mistake made by Christian thinkers in comparing Christianity and other religions is to consider these other religions, at least implicitly, as Churches with a definite credal system and an external organization under a definite visible authority. Indeed, all religions are visible and social entities with a community of belief and worship. But in most religions other than Christianity the community itself arises from and is sustained by the actually shared religious experience rather than constituted by extrinsic ordination and history. In the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions it is the historical call from God and the visible leadership, authority and organization claiming divine authority that have primacy and conformity to this established order and obedience in faith to God's self-disclosure in history are considered necessary for attaining an inner experience of God's saving grace.

Even the generous designation of non-Christians as anonymous Christians by some contemporary Western theologians betrays a lack of comprehension of the inner logic of their religious experience. For them acceptance of a divine Saviour appearing in a particular point in human history at a particular place was never an important or even integral part of religious experience. Hence it cannot be supposed that such acceptance was implied in their faith. Here the confusion is between what is accepted as objectively valid and necessary according to a consistent conceptual system and what is consciously accepted by one individual or a particular tradition as valid and necessary for the integrity of one's religious experience. The unity of the human race as a single family of men with a single history, and the need for all men to be treated as one community with regard to their salvation may be considered in themselves as basic objective facts equally valid for all men. But only one with an abstract universal concept of human nature applicable to every man and with a sense of purpose discerned in human events can appreciate these facts as set forth in traditional Christian thought. This thought pattern was developed in the Mediterranean world. But one brought up in the African or Indian tradition may not easily perceive the organic historical unity of all men and all the organizational set up, rites and symbolism employed to bring



out these values like the rigidly defined sacramental rites and clergy-centered organization of society may look meaningless and irrelevant to him. But this does not mean that he will not have any concern for his fellow human beings and their salvation. But this concern will be expressed in ways quite different from those familiar to the Mediterranean people. Religion should be taken primarily as a human phenomenon. Though it deals with God, it is man's approach to the ultimate meaning of his life. This cannot be attained by facts and propositions totally outside of actual human experience. Only to the extent those facts and ideas are relevant and accessible to his style of experience, they become relevant to his religion. Man has to approach God in his own way, according to the patterns and models he has assumed to experience and express his life.

Hence, even granting the centrality of Christ's incarnation for human history and all men's salvation, it cannot be argued that in approaching that fact all traditions have to shed their own modes of thought and adopt the mediterranean type of thinking.

### **The Gospel and Religions**

Another source of confusion in the Christian encounter with non-Christians is placing the whole stress on doctrinal content. Thus it is very easy to describe Christianity as the way God himself made known to mankind as to "how men are to serve him, and thus be saved in Christ and come to blessedness",<sup>15</sup> and to overemphasize the so-called esoteric elements of Christian faith like that of the Trinity, Incarnation, Church, Transubstantiation and Purgatory and oppose them to non-Christian tenets labelled as polytheism, pantheism, transmigration of souls and the like. But the divergence in doctrine is the minimal factor in the encounter of religions. Truth is one, God of non-Christians is the God of Christians too; Jesus Christ did not reveal another God. Christianity was not announced as a system of esoteric information nor as a code of moral conduct given for the benefit of Christians alone. Christianity is primarily the Gospel, the good news of what God did in Jesus Christ for the sake of all men. The Christian messengers are not bringing anything that is not

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15) *Ibid.*

already there but are only drawing attention to what has already taken place and affected the fate of every one. They are saying as both St. Peter<sup>16</sup> and St. Paul<sup>17</sup> declare in their sermons to the gentiles that there is no longer a purely natural order where people are left to their own devices to find the will of God for them, but that in its place there is a new world order in which all men and all traditions are comprehended with Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the one Saviour and judge of all men as its focus.

The Gospel does not propose another new religion parallel to other religions in order to replace them merely with a new code of beliefs, conduct and worship, but a new order in which all that is good and authentic in humanity get a new meaning and purpose. With the resurrection and glorification of Christ not only his humanity does assume a new meaning and purpose, but human history itself and all its religious traditions gain a higher orientation. Indeed, the religious tradition of Israel has a more intimate cultural continuity and historical connection with the new order, and the Old Testament gets a new meaning in the light of the New Covenant. But history and culture are not everything that is valuable in humanity, and these, on the other hand, can be an obstacle in perceiving the newness of salvation realized in the Word-made-flesh. The other religious traditions too form an integral part of the new order. Hence the task of theology is to show not only the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, which is obvious to any one with a sense of history and culture, but also the intimate relation between the World Testament concretely expressed in the authentic religious traditions of man and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here a serious question must be raised whether the divine plan of human salvation is bringing all religions into one religion or even super-religion with the ideal of one fold and one shepherd. Looking at the first two millennia of Christianity's history one has to admit that after the first spurt of Church expansion during the early centuries of Christianity it has not moved any closer to the realization of that ideal, and if we read carefully the signs of the times there is little hope that there will

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16) *Acts* 10, 34-43

17) *Acts* 30-31



be any greater success in the next millennium. If at all anything, the world, especially the Western world, is giving out signs of a post-Christian era. While we must emphasize the centrality of Jesus Christ as the concrete presence of God in the world and as the focus of human history, should we not in fidelity to the Gosepl avoid all identification between the Church and Christ and look upon the "little Flock" of the Christian community rather as a catalyst to bring to the awareness of all religious traditions and of all men the values of the Gosepl, and authentic human community that shows forth the presence of God in the world? In fareness to other religious traditions it has to be admitted that they too have the same Gosepl values to a greater or lesser degree, expressed according to the genius of their traditions. There is no warranty in the Christian message to demand that they should repudiate their authentic values and cultural idioms in order to accept the same values in an alien idiom. What Christian missionary activity can accomplish in this respect is to break down the cultural and historical barriers that divide man against man, nation against nation and traditions among themselves so that all men can actually feel themselves a single family with God present in their midst and in the course of events of their history.

### **Faith and dogma**

An overemphasis on Christian "teachings" as opposed to non-Christian tenets is not very helpful in understanding other religions. The general method of comparison in this area has been to place side by side the answers given by different religions to the basic religious questions like that of the existence of God, creation of the world, survival of man after death and his future reward or punishment. But the difficulty with this approach is that the mode in which these questions were proposed and answered were highly conditioned by the cultural context and actual concerns of the people who raised them. Thus Jesus Christ himself came in the Jewish tradition and his particular teachings responded to the particular context of the people he was addressing. Though Christ's words and actions as the epiphany of the divinity could be assumed to have an inexhaustible meaning and significance, the same epiphany when communicated to the Church was mediated through the limited and culturally

conditioned experience of the Apostles. Hence the original teachings of Christ can be reached only through human hermeneutics and hence cannot be claimed a privileged position over the teachings of other religious leaders who had to express their authentic experience of God in human words. Hence Karl Barth's summary condemnation of religions as pure human creation over against the paramount importance of the Bible as the direct judgement of God is an oversimplification. Both demand hermeneutics to arrive at the original divine source of experience. Only through hermeneutics can one hope to arrive at what Christ actually taught and meant; only through proper interpretation can we try to understand what experience the sage was expressing in his words.

In this matter the theologian is today in a better position than ever before to appreciate the religious language of the Bible as well as of other religions.<sup>18</sup>

Formerly the professional theologians considered the mythological and symbolic language of the Bible and of other religious Scriptures purely anthropomorphic and inclined more to the rational abstractions and conceptual systems of philosophers. Today new movements in philosophy like Phenomenology and Personalism have raised concrete experience to a respectable status above conceptual rationalization, and exegetes and Biblical theologians have brought out the importance of Scripture as the story of God's love for man and man's concrete experience of God. Under the influence of the philosophy of language, history of religions and depth psychology modern man has discovered religious language as the birth-place of his discourse on God and one may say in a certain sense of God himself. Hence the so-called rational philosophy is in fact a theology reduced to the level of the layman. So, if a theologian does not fall into Biblical fundamentalism of simply repeating the Bible, nor stop short at mere hermeneutics, which is only a subtle form of fundamentalism, and takes seriously the God of the Bible he can understand and appreciate the religious language in other religions. In fact to take seriously the God of the Bible is not to confine Him to the

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18) A. Gesche. "Le Dieu de la Bible et la théologie" *Eph. Theology-Lov.* 51 (1975) 5-34.



tribal ghettos of Chanaan and Galilee but to see Him as the God of the universe, experienced in concrete by religious men of all ages. In this way other religions need not be viewed as rival of Christianity but as partners providing complementary perspectives on the ineffable mystery of God. Every dogma tends to limit and restrict faith according to the actual situation and needs of the particular community. Hence the particular beliefs and dogmatic definitions of religious traditions and communities should be viewed in the light of humanity's total openness in faith to the saving grace of the one God.

### Christian attitude to other religions

The primary task of the Christian theologian is to explain the meaning and relevance of other religions in the light of Christ. Since for him Jesus Christ is the Son of God made the son of man, the focal point of human history and the one mediator between God and men in the one economy of salvation for all men, he has to look at other religions in the light of Christ and other religious leaders like Buddha and Krishna as functions of Christ. According to the Fathers and writers of the ancient Church like Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria the one economy of salvation which found its focus in Christ embraced the whole humanity. As Irenaeus says "there is only one God who from beginning to end, through various economies, comes to the help of mankind".<sup>19</sup> Not only Israel but the whole mankind was subjected to a process of education by the Spirit of God; the Logos through the Spirit ordered the whole world and especially the microcosm of man.<sup>20</sup> According to Clement of Alexandria for the Greeks their philosophy was a sort of Testament.<sup>21</sup> It would be denying the very inner logic of the Incarnation to restrict the economy of Christ in its historical manifestation in Palestine or in the visible Church.

As Archbishop George Khodr states, for a Christian "any reading of religions is a reading of Christ. It is Christ alone who is received as light when grace visits a Brahmin, a Buddhist or

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19) Irenaeus. *Adv Haereses*, III, 12,13.

20) Clement of Alex. *Protreptikos* 1,5.

21) Clement, *Stromata*, V. 8,3.

a Mohammedan reading his own Scriptures. Every martyr for the truth, every man persecuted for what he believes to be right, dies in communion with Christ. The mystics of Islamic countries with their witness to suffering love lived the authentic Johannine agape".<sup>22</sup> Hence at the same time as presenting in all humility and sincerity his experience of the Word-made-flesh to others, a Christian must also discern the working of the Spirit in other religions, read their Scriptures not only according to their historical, objective meaning, but also in their special meaning in Christ analogous to his understanding of the Old Testament in the light of the New, and penetrate beyond the symbols and historical forms and discover the profound intention of religious men and relate their apprehension of the divinity to the object of our Christian hope. For this, Christians themselves have to undergo a conversion first and banish all confessional pride and all feelings of cultural or historical superiority.<sup>23</sup>

The problem with those who live in a Christian atmosphere is that they identify their faith with the religious culture they live in and breathe, and they fail to recognize that there are other approaches to the ultimate which also kindle consuming passions in human hearts. An obvious fact often passed unnoticed by missionaries is that those who stand close to the heart of the great religious traditions rarely convert to Christianity, though they may learn from Christianity with acknowledgement. Christianity cannot grow at their expense since they retain their faith with "the integrity of the myth system through which they find expression for their faith".<sup>24</sup> Hence the Christian must learn to look at his own faith from the experiential level of his non-Christian neighbour to recognize the value of his religion and of the specific form of religious experience.

### Paradigms for inter-religious studies

The theologian must also learn to take an impartial and objective view of religions including Christianity. Various scholars

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22) Msgr. George Khodr. "Christianity in a Pluralistic World: The Economy of the Spirit" *Ecum. Rev.* 23 (1971) p. 125.

23) *Ibid.* pp. 127-28.

24) Burlan A. Sizemore Jr. "Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World" *Journ. Ecum. Stud.* 13 (1976) p. 413.



have proposed different paradigms for this comparative study. These paradigms have to be carefully examined with regard to their individual and cumulative value in appreciating the meaning and role of different religions. They are not all equally right, and they cannot all be accepted together in a common system of thought. Yet, they are complementary since they correct each other's defects and also present at least one valid point that should be considered in the evaluation of religions.

As we have already remarked above the method of comparing different religions as parallel systems of beliefs, cult and morality is now generally abandoned. Since Christians accept Jesus Christ as the unique Son of God become incarnate in human history and as the fullest self-disclosure of God to man, several authors like H. Kraemer and Paul Tillich would judge all religions including Christianity with the unique revelation of God in Christ as the criterion. Kraemer states his position in *Why Christianity of All Religions*:

"I propose to set the religions, including Christianity, in the light of the Person of Jesus Christ, who is *the* Revelation of God and alone has the authority to criticize – I mean to judge discriminately and with complete understanding – every religion and everything that is in man or proceeds from him.... by Jesus Christ I mean that Jesus whom we know from the total witness of apostles and evangelists in the New Testament, the Jesus who says, not this or that is the Truth, but 'I am the Truth'. So far as I am concerned.... He is the criterion of truth, the standard of judgement and evaluation".<sup>25</sup>

But the problem is that the total witness of the apostles and evangelists necessarily implies the long history of the transmission of their witness and the fallible hermeneutical study of the Christian texts.

Others would judge religions in their anthropological value to the extent they express the authentic aspiration of man to

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25) H. Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions*, trs. Hubert Hospkins, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) p. 15.

attain the divine in response to God's salvific invitation. But as Peter Beyerhaus has stated in an article, the problem is that man in religion stands at the intersection of three dimensions, his own relatedness to God, God's active concern for him, and the influence sphere of the daemonic powers. There is no guarantee that the divine element will always prevail.<sup>26</sup> Yet, we can say, the more authentically human a religion is the more divine also it will be.

Those who place the emphasis on salvation history and look at Christ coming in the fullness of time as its focal point must evaluate each religion in the context not merely of general human history but of the particular people who embraced that religion. A good example is provided by the Hebrew Prophets who refused to identify the history of Israel with the totality of God's redeeming acts in creation. Israel was chosen not to present herself to the rest of the world as the sole bearer of God's redeeming love to the world, but as a symbol of how God is at work in other nations too in a redemptive way. Thus Isaias did not fail to prophesy that both Egypt and Assyria, the enemies of Israel, will at the right time come to receive the blessing of God.<sup>27</sup> Hence it is wrong to restrict the salvation history to the Church, visible, invisible or anonymous. Just like Israel each nation should have its own captivity, exodus, rebellion and rebuilding. And this is what religions are all about: they present the providential activity of God in the history of each nation and people. What judges their authenticity is their capacity to lead their followers to an eschatological fulfilment.<sup>28</sup>

Those, however, who start with a metaphysical view of salvation have to accept the fact that at present there is only one order of religious life for all men, whether Christian or non-Christian, and that is a supernatural one centered in Christ, the one Son of God. Salvation in any religion or outside all religions is inclusion in that unique order of salvation. The particular re-

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26) *Kerygma und Dogma* 15 (1969) 87-104.

27) *Is* 19, 21-25.

28) Choan Seng Sun. "From Israel to Asia: a Theological Leap." *The Ecum. Rev.* 28 (1976) 252-265.



ligion can only constitute the total human context in which the saving grace of God in Christ is actually experienced by the individual.<sup>29</sup> This "transcendental" understanding of the total human history as the condition for the very possibility for man's relationship with God in Revelation, Grace and Faith, leads Rahner to affirm the anonymous Christianity of all religious people. H. R. Schlette has presented this paradigm as follows:

"If we take as our starting point the phenomenological, philosophical analysis of man's historical character....and if this character is also understood to be the condition of the factual (no longer merely possible) sacred history recorded in Sacred Scripture and coextensive with secular history, it is possible to say that a theology of redemptive history can be described as "transcendental theology."<sup>30</sup>

Thus the inclusion of all men in one single scheme of salvation in Christ is the basic condition for the possibility of that salvation.

On the other hand, those who draw inspiration from the process-model of Whitehead and Hartshorn can find the unity of all religions in the one Logos, the symbol and inner spirit of the unending drive towards liberation, yesterday, today and tomorrow. In the particular time-space bound limitations of Christianity this inner principle is manifested in Jesus of Nazareth, the transforming power that relativizes every position, even the system of Christian values produced under the historically conditioned circumstances. But the uniqueness of the manifestation of the Logos in Jesus Christ is not onliness. It is the same Logos that is at work also in other religions like Buddhism and

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29) Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964) p. 54: "The good and bonafide Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism...." Karl Rahner, *Theol. Invest.* Vol. V. (Baltimore: Melicon, 1966) pp. 121-132.

30) H. R. Schlette, *Toward a Theology of Religions*, Quest. Disp. 14, (New York, 1966) p. 70.

Hinduism. These various religious manifestations are not only rooted in the same Logos as different expressions of the same transforming principle, but are also interrelated among themselves as expressions of the same authentic human reality which is continually in process.<sup>31</sup>

### Our theological task

In the face of these different paradigms the theologian's task is not to choose one of them rejecting all others. They are only different perspectives from different angles on a mystery of divine grace which cannot adequately be comprehended. They do not either individually or collectively explain the mystery. Our task is to examine each paradigm, uncover its weaknesses and understand the specific theological method implied in it. The more such paradigms of the interrelationship of different religions within the one divine economy of salvation we can discover and the more carefully we bring them together into a coherent system, the better our understanding of religions also will be.

Dharmaram College, Bangalore  
Fordham University, New York

John B. Chethimattam

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31) John B. Cobb Jr. *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) p. 59. 139 3tc.

# The Rhetoric of Intrareligious Dialogue\*

"....and here the three sages took leave of each other with great love and in a very agreeable way: each of them asked forgiveness to the others in case he might have profered any inconvenient word against the religion of the other; and each of them did pardon the others. And when they were about to leave one of the sages said: Some profit should come from the venture that has happened to us in the forest. Would it not be good that, following the model of the five trees and the ten conditions represented by their flowers, we could discuss one time every day following the indications given to us by Dame Intelligence? Our discussions should last as long as needed until we would arrive at one faith and one religion so that we would have a form of honoring each other and serve one another. This would be the quickest way to come to our mutual concord. For war, strained works and ill will produce harm and shame, encumbering people to agree in one belief.-" Cf. Ramon Llull, *Obres essencials*, Barcelona (Editorial selecta), vol. 1, 1957, p. 1138.

I do not intend to elaborate here a theory of religious encounter but only present a part of that very encounter. And it is out of this praxis that I would like to propose the following *attitudes* and *models* for the proper rhetoric in the meeting of religious traditions.

I do not elaborate now on the value of these attitudes or the merits of these models. This would require studying the function and nature of the metaphor as well as developing a theory of the religious encounter. I only describe some attitudes and models, although I will probably betray my sympathies in the form of critical considerations. The dialogue needs an adequate rhetoric—in the classical sense of the word.

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\* Introductory chapter of a forthcoming book to be published by Paulist Press, New York.



## 1. Three Attitudes

### a. Exclusivism

A believing member of a religion in one way or another considers his religion to be true. Now, the claim to truth has a certain inbuilt claim to exclusivity. If a given statement is true, its contradictory cannot also be true. And if a certain human tradition claims to offer a universal context for truth, anything contrary to that 'universal truth' will have to be declared false.

If, for instance, Islam embodies the true religion, a 'non-islamic truth' cannot exist in the field of religion. Any long standing religious tradition of course, will have developed the necessary distinctions so as not to appear so blunt. It will say, for instance, that there are degrees of truth and that any 'religious truth', if it is really true, 'is' already a muslim one, although the people concerned may not be conscious of it. It will further distinguish an objective order of truth from a subjective one so that a person can be 'in good faith' and yet be in objective error, which as such will not be imputed against that person, etc.

This attitude has a certain pathos of heroism in it. You consecrate your life and dedicate your entire existence to something which is really worthy of being called a human cause, to something that claims to be not just a partial and imperfect truth, but a universal and even absolute truth. To be sure, an absolute, God or Value, has to be the final guarantee for such an attitude, so that you do not follow it because of your whims or because you have uncritically raised your point of view to an absolute value. It is God's rights you defend when asserting your religion as 'absolute religion'. This does not imply an outright condemnation of all other human beings who have not received the 'grace' of your calling. You may experience this call as a burden and a duty (to carry vicariously the responsibility for the whole world) more than as a privilege and a right. Who are we to put conditions on the Almighty?

On the other hand, this attitude presents its difficulties. First, it carries with it the obvious danger of intolerance, hybris and contempt for the other. "We belong to the club of truth."

It further bears the intrinsic weakness of assuming an almost purely logical conception of truth and the uncritical attitude of an epistemological naiveté. Truth is many-faceted and even if you assume that God speaks an exclusive language, everything depends on your understanding of it so that you may never really know whether your interpretation is the *only* right one. To recur to a superhuman instance in the discussion among two religious beliefs does not solve any question, for it is often the case that God 'speaks' also to others, and relying both partners on God's authority we will always need the human mediation, so that ultimately God's authority depends on Man's interpretation (of the divine revelation).

As a matter of fact, although there are many *de facto* remnants of an exclusivistic attitude today, it is hardly defended *de jure*. To use the christian *skandalon*, for instance, to defend christianity would amount to the very betrayal of that saying about the 'stumbling block'. It would be the height of hypocrisy to condemn others and justify oneself using the scandal of God's revelation as a rationale for defending one's own attitude: divine revelation ceases to be a scandal for you (for you seem to accept it without scandal)—and you hurl it at others.

## **b. Inclusivism**

In the present world context one can hardly fail to discover positive and true values—even of the highest order—outside of one's own tradition. Traditional religions have to face this challenge. 'Splendid isolation' is no longer possible. The most plausible condition for the claim to truth of one's own tradition is to affirm at the same time that it includes in different levels all that there is of truth wherever it exists. The inclusivistic attitude will tend to reinterpret things in such a way as to make them not only palatable but also assimilable. Whenever facing a plain contradiction, for instance, it will make the necessary distinctions between different planes so as to be able to overcome that contradiction. It will tend to become a universalism of an existential or formal nature rather than of essential content. A doctrinal truth can hardly claim universality if it insists too much on specific contents because the grasping of the contents always implies a particular '*forma mentis*.' An attitude of tolerant

admission of different planes will, on the contrary, have it easier. An umbrella pattern or a formal structure can easily embrace different thought-systems.

If Vedanta, for example, is really the end and acme of all the Vedas, these latter understood as the representation of all types of ultimate revelation, it can seemingly affirm that all sincere human affirmations have a place in its scheme because they represent different stages in the development of human consciousness and have a value in the particular context in which they are said. Nothing is rejected and all is fitted into its proper place.

This attitude has a certain quality of magnanimity and grandeur in it. You can follow your own path and do not need to condemn the other. You can even enter into communion with all other ways of life and, if you happen to have the real experience of inclusivity, you may be at peace not only with yourself, but with all other human and divine ways as well. You can be concrete in your allegiances and universal in your outlook.

On the other hand, this attitude also entails some difficulties. First, it also presents the danger of hybris, since it is only you who have the privilege of an all-embracing vision and tolerant attitude, you who allot to the others the place they must take in the universe. You are tolerant in your own eyes, but not in front of those who challenge your right to be on top. It further has the intrinsic difficulties of an almost alogical conception of truth and an inbuilt inner contradiction when the attitude is spelt out in theory and praxis.

If this attitude allows for a variegated expression of religious truth' so as to be able to include the most disparate systems of thought, it is bound to make of truth a purely relative value. Truth here cannot have an independent intellectual content, for it is one thing for the parsi and another for the vaishnava, one thing for the atheist and another for the theist. So, it is also another thing for you—unless you jump outside the model because it is you who have the clue, you who find a place for all the different worldviews. But then your belief, conception, ideology intuition or whatever name we may call



it, becomes a supersystem the moment that you formulate it: you seem to understand the lower viewpoints and put them in their right places. You cannot avoid claiming for yourself a superior knowledge even if you deny that your conviction is another viewpoint. If you 'say', furthermore, that your position is only the ineffable fruit of a mystical insight, the moment that you put it into practice nothing prevents another from discovering and formulating the implicit assumption of that attitude. Ultimately you claim to have a fuller truth in comparison with all the others who have only partial and relative truths.

As a matter of fact although there are still many tendencies in several religious traditions that consider themselves all-inclusive, there are today only very few theoretical and philosophical formulations of a purely inclusivistic attitude. The claim of pluralism today is too strong to be so easily bypassed.

### c. Parallelism

If your religion appears far from being perfect and yet it represents for you a symbol of the right path and a similar conviction seems to be the case for others, if you cannot dismiss the religious claim of the other nor assimilate it completely into your tradition, a plausible alternative is to assume that all are different creeds which, in spite of meanderings and crossings, actually run parallel to meet only in the ultimate, in the *eschaton*, at the very end of the human pilgrimage. Religions would then be parallel paths and our most urgent duty would be not to interfere with others, not to convert them or even to borrow from them, but to deepen our own respective traditions so that we may meet at the end, and in the depths of our own traditions. You be a better christian, a better marxist, a better hindu and you will find unexpected riches and also points of contact with other people's ways.

This attitude presents very positive advantages. It is tolerant, it respects the others and does not judge them. It avoids muddy syncretisms and eclecticismisms that concoct a religion according to our private tastes; it keeps the boundaries clear and spurs constant reform of one's own ways.

On the other hand, it also is not free of difficulties. First of all, it seems to go against the historical experience that the different religious and human traditions of the world have most of the time come out of mutual interferences, influences and fertilizations. It too hastily assumes, furthermore, that every human tradition has in itself all the elements for further growth and development; in a word, it assumes the self-sufficiency of every tradition and seems to deny the need or convenience of mutual learning, or the need to walk outside the walls of one particular human tradition—as if in every one of them the entire human experience were crystallized or condensed. It flatters every one of us to hear that we possess *in nuce* all we need for a full human and religious maturity, but it splits the family of Man into watertight compartments, making any kind of conversion a real betrayal of one's own being. It allows growth, but not mutation. Even if we run parallel to each other, are there not *sangams*, *Prayāgs*, affluents, inundations, natural and artificial dams, and above all, does not one and the same water flow 'heavenwards' in the veins of the human being? Mere parallelism eschews the real issues.

Notwithstanding, this attitude presents on the other hand more prospects for an initial working hypothesis today. It carries a note of hope and patience at the same time; hope that we will meet at the end and patience that meanwhile we have to bear our differences. Yet when facing concrete problems of interferences, mutual influences and even dialogue one cannot just wait until this *kalpa* comes to an end or the *eschaton* appears. All crossings are dangerous, but there is no new life without *maithuna*.

I have described these three attitudes as an example of basic postures which when put to work becomes, of course, much more sophisticated. When the encounter actually takes place, be it in actual facts or in the more conscious dialogue, one needs some root-metaphors in order to articulate the different problems. It is here that some models may prove useful. I shall briefly describe three of them.

## 2. Three Models

### a. The physical model: the rainbow

The different religious traditions of mankind are like the almost infinite number of colors that appear once the divine or simply white light of reality falls on the prism of human experience: it diffracts into innumerable traditions, doctrines and religions. Green is not yellow, hinduism is not buddhism and yet at the fringes one cannot know, except by postulating it artificially, where yellow ends and green begins. Even more, through any particular color, viz. religion, one can reach the source of the white light. Any follower of a human tradition is given the possibility of reaching his or her destination, fullness, salvation provided there is a beam of light and not sheer darkness. If two colors mix, they may sire another. Similarly with religious traditions, the meeting of two may give birth to a new one. In point of fact, most of the known religions today are results of such mutual fecundations (aryans-dravidians, jews-greeks, indians-muslims, etc.). Further, it is only from an agreed point of view that we can judge a religion over against another. Regarding social concern, for instance, one tradition may be more fruitful than another, but the latter may be more powerful than the former in securing personal happiness. We may begin the rainbow with the infra-red, or with the ultraviolet, or choose, for instance, 5,000 Angstroms as the central point, etc. Furthermore, within the green area all will appear under that particular light. A similar object within the red area will look reddish. This model reminds us that the context is paramount in comparing 'religious truths'. Nor is this all. Just as the color of a body is the only color generally not absorbed by that body, this model would remind us also that a religion similarly absorbs all other colors and hides them in its bosom, so that its external color is in truth only its appearance, its message to the outer world, but not the totality of its nature. We come to this realization when we attempt to understand a religion from within. The real body that has received the entire beam of white light keeps for itself all the other colors so that it would not accord with truth to judge a religion only from its outer color. This metaphor can still take more refinements. One particular religion may include only a few beams of light while another may cover a wider aspect of the spectrum. Time and space may (like the principle of Doppler-Fizeau) introduce



modifications in the wave-length of a particular tradition, so that it changes down the ages or along with the places. What is a christian in the India of the twentieth century may be far different from what was considered such in tenth century France.

This metaphor does not necessarily imply that all the religions are the same, that there may not be black or colorless spots, that for some particular problems only one particular color may be the appropriate one, etc. The metaphor, moreover, could still serve to contest the right of something which does not have light in it to be called a religious tradition. A humanistic critique of traditional religions, for instance, may well call obscurantistic all the religions of the past and deny to them the character of bearing light; only the enlightenment traditions of rationalism, marxism and humanism, let us say, would come into consideration. I am citing this extreme case in order to clarify the immense variation possible in the use of this root-metaphor. It could even provide an image for the conception of one particular religion considering itself as the white beam and all the others refractions of that primordial religiousness. Or, on the contrary, it may offer an example of how to say that the variety of religions belongs to the beauty and richness of the human situation since it is only the entire rainbow that provides a complete picture of the true religious dimension of Man.

Yet the value of a model comes not only from its possible applicability, but also from its connaturality with the phenomenon under analysis. The physical fact of the rainbow in this case helps us to explain the intricacies of the anthropological phenomenon of religion.

#### **b. The geometrical model: the topological invariant**

If in the first model diffraction is what produces the different lights, viz. religions, transformation is the cause of the different forms and shapes of geometrical figures, viz. of religions, in our second model.

In and through space and also due to the influence of time, a primordial and original form takes on an almost indefinite number of possible transformations through the twisting of Men, the stretching by history, the bending by natural forces and

so on. Religions appear different and even mutually irreconcilable until or unless a topological invariant is found. This invariant does not need to be a single one for all religions. Some may prefer to hold the theory of families of religions, while others may try to work out the hypothesis that all the different human ways come from a fundamental experience transformed according to laws, which like in any geometrical case have first to be discovered. Or again, others may say that religions are actually different until the corresponding topological transformation have been constructed. The model is polyvalent. Homeomorphism is not the same as analogy: it represents a functional equivalence discovered through a topological transformation. Brahman and God are not merely two analogous names; they are homeomorphic in the sense that each of them stands for something that performs an equivalent function within their respective systems. But this can only be formulated once the homeomorphism of a topological equivalence has been found. Religions which may appear at first sight very different from each other may find their connections once the topological transformation is discovered that permits connecting the two traditions under consideration. This model offers a challenge to further study and prevents us from drawing hurried conclusions. A literal use of the topological model would assume not only that all religions are transformations of a primordial experience, intuition or datum (as would be the case with the Rainbow model), but also that each religious tradition is a dimension of the other, that there is a kind of 'circumincessio' or 'perichoresis' or 'pratītyasamutpāda' among all the religious traditions of the world so that mere contiguity models are insufficient to express their relation. Religions do not stand side by side, but they are actually intertwined and inside each other. Vishnu dwells in the heart of Shiva and vice-versa. Each religion represents the whole for that particular human group and in a certain way is the religion of the other group only in a different topological form. This may be perhaps too optimistic a view, but the model provides also for the necessary cautions or restrictions. One cannot *a priori*, for instance, formulate this theory, but it may well be a working hypothesis spurring our minds towards some transcendental unity of the religious experience of Man. It is clear that this model does not exclude a divine factor nor a critical evaluation of the human traditions. Sometimes it

may be that we do not succeed in finding the corresponding topological equivalence, but sometimes it may also be that such a transformation does not exist.

The comparison among religions according to this model would then not be the business of finding analogies, which are bound to be always somewhat superficial and need a *primum analogatum* as point of reference (which should already belong to the traditions compared if the comparison is to be fair), but would rather be the business of understanding religions from within and discovering their concrete structures, and of finding out their corresponding homeomorphisms. Religious variety would appear here not so much a bountifully colorful universe as different appearances of an inner structure detectable only in a deeper intuition, be this called mystical or scientific.

Now, the topological laws do not need to be merely of a rational or logical nature, as is the case with geometrical topology. They could as well be historical or *sui generis*. In a word, the topological model is not only useful for possible doctrinal equivalents; it could also serve to explore other forms of correspondence and equivalence. We may succeed in explaining, for instance, how primitive buddhism was reabsorbed in India through a certain advaita by means of finding the proper topological laws of transformation.

### c. The anthropological model: language

Whatever theory we may defend regarding the origin and nature of religion; whether it be a divine gift or a human invention or both, the fact remains that it is at least a human reality and as such coextensive with another also at least human reality called language. This model considers each religion as a language. This model has ancient antecedents. To the widespread old belief that there were seventy-two languages, some added the conviction that there were equally seventy-two religions. "Item dixit—say the proceedings of an inquisitorial process of the XIII century in Bologna, condemning a Cathar—, quod sicut sunt LXII lingue, ita sunt LXII fides."

Any religion is complete as any language is also capable of expressing everything that it feels the need to express. Any



religion is open to growth and evolution as any language is. Both are capable of expressing or adopting new shades of meaning, of shifting idioms or emphases, refining ways of expression and changing them. When a new need is felt in any religious or linguistic world, there are always means of dealing with that need. Furthermore, although any language is a world in itself, it is not without relations with neighboring languages, borrowing from them and open to mutual influences. And yet each language only takes as much as it can assimilate from a foreign language. Similarly with religions: they influence each other and borrow from one another without losing their identity. As an extreme case a religion, like a language, may disappear entirely. And the reasons also seen very similar—conquest, decadence, emigration, etc.

From the internal point of view of each language and religion, it makes little sense to say that one language is more perfect than another, for you can in your language (as well as in your religion) say all that you feel you need to say. If you would feel the need to say something else or something different, you would say it. If you use only one word for camel and hundreds for the different metals, and another language does just the opposite, it is because you have different patterns of differentiation for camels and metals. The same with religions. You may have only one word for wisdom, god, compassion or virtue and another religion scores of them.

The great problem appears when we come to the encounter of languages—and religions. The question here is translation. Religions are equivalent to the same extent that languages are translatable, and they are unique as much as languages are untranslatable. There is the common world of objectifiable objects. They are the objects of empirical or logical or logical verification. This is the realm of terms. Each term is an epistemic sign standing for an empirically or logically verifiable object. The terms 'tree' 'wine', 'atom'. 'four', can be translated into any given language if we have a method of empirically pointing out a visible thing (tree), a physically recognizable substance (wine), a physico-mathematically definable entity (atom) and a logical cipher (four). Each of these cases demands some specific conditions, but we may assume that these conditions can all b

empirically or logically verifiable once a certain axiom is accepted. In short, all terms are translatable insofar as a name could easily be invented or adopted even by a language which might lack a particular term ('atom' for instance). Similarly, all religions have a translatable sphere: all refer to the human being, to his well-being, to overcoming the possible obstacles to it, and the like. Religious terms – qua terms – are translatable.

The most important part of a language as well as of a religion, however, is not terms but words, i. e. not epistemic signs to orient us in the world of objects, but living symbols to allow us to live in the world of Men and Gods. Now, words are not objectifiable. A word is not totally separable from the meaning we give to it and each of us in fact gives different shades of meaning to the same word. A word reflects a total human experience and cannot be severed from it. A word is not empirically or logically detectable. When we say 'justice', 'dharma', 'karuṇā', we cannot point to an object, but have to refer to crystallizations of human experiences that vary with people, places, ages, etc. We cannot properly speaking translate words. We can only trans-plant them along with a certain surrounding context which gives them meaning and offers the horizon over against which they can be understood, i. e. assimilated within another horizon. And even then the transplanted word, if it survives, will soon extend its roots in the soil and acquire new aspects, connotations, etc. Similarly with religions: they are not translatable like terms; only certain transplants are possible under appropriate conditions. There is not an object 'God', 'justice', or 'brahman', a thing in itself independent of those living words, over against which we may check the correction of the translation. In order to translate them we have to trans-plant the corresponding world-view that makes those words say what they intend to say. A non-saying word is like a non-sung song. If the words is not heard as saying what it intends to say, we have not actually translated that word. The translation of religious insights cannot be done unless the insight that has originated that word is also transplanted. Now for this, a mere 'sight' from the outside is not sufficient. We may then translate only the outer carcass of a word and not its real meaning. No word can be cut from its speaker if it has to remain an authentic word and not a mere term. The translator

has to be also a speaker in that foreign language, in that alien tradition; he has to be a true spokesman for that religion; he has to be, to a certain extent (that I shall not describe further here), convinced of the truth he conveys, converted to the tradition from which he translates. Here I am already in the intra-religious dialogue.

The translator has to speak the 'foreign' language as his own. As long as we speak a language translating from another, we shall never speak fluently nor even correctly. Only when we speak that language, only when you speak that religion as your own will you really be able to be a spokesman for it, a genuine translator. And this obviously implies at the same time that you have not forgotten your native tongue, that you are equally capable of expressing yourself in the other linguistic world. It is then that one begins to wonder at the exactness of the translations, or as the expression still goes, at the 'fidelity' of many a translation. Are you keeping fidelity to both brahman and God, dharma and religion (or justice, or order?) when you translate in that way? Or are you obliged to enlarge, to deepen and so stretch your own language in order to make place for the insights of the other? And this may be the case even with terms that are in part empirically verifiable. Are you so sure that when you translate *gau* with 'cow' you are not misleading the modern english reader if you let him believe that you speak merely of a bovine female related perhaps to cowboys but not to the *kāmadhenu*? *Gau* is more than a zoological name as *sūrya* (sun) is more than a mere name for an astronomical or physical body.

The linguistic model helps also in the complicated problem of Comparative Religion. Only when we have a common language can we begin to compare, i. e. to weight against a common background. Only then may a mutual understanding take place. This model, moreover, makes it clear that we cannot compare languages (religions) outside language (religion) and that there is no language (religion) except in concrete languages (religions). Comparative religion can only be comparative religions from the standpoint of the concrete religions themselves. This demands an entirely new method from that arising out of the assumption that there is a non-religious neutral 'reason' entitled to pass comparative judgments in the field of religions.



### 3. Pluralism

The mention of pluralism by way of conclusion may not be out of place. The aim of the intrareligious dialogue is understanding. It is not to win over the other or to come to a total agreement or a universal religion. The ideal is communication in order to bridge the gulfs of mutual ignorance and misunderstandings between the different cultures of the world, letting them speak and speak out their own insights in their own languages. Some may wish even to reach communion, but this does not imply at all that the aim is a uniform unity or a reduction of all the pluralistic variety of Man into one single religion, system, ideology or tradition. Pluralism stands between unrelated plurality and a monolithic unity. It implies that the human condition in its present reality should not be neglected, let alone despised in favor of an ideal(?) situation of human uniformity. On the contrary, it takes our factual situation as real and affirms that in the actual polarities of our human existence we find our real being.

California University  
Santa Barbara, Ca. 93106

Raimundo Panikkar

# The Religious Experience of Pseudo-Dionysius

## Introduction

Pseudo-Dionysius has always had an important contribution to make in theology and spirituality. This has been true ever since his doctrine became widely known, starting from its official acceptance at the Lateran Council of 649 A. D., under the authority of Pope Martin I, when St. Maximus the Confessor (the leading light of this Council) encouraged the reading of his works, all the way up to and including the Fifteenth Century. For nine hundred years his authority was unmatched. He is the classic *auctoritas*, the normative authority of Medieval Theology, the great doctor and spiritual master of the middle Ages. Consider the vast influence that the *corpus dionysiacum* has had on the formation of theology all throughout these fruitful and relatively peaceful centuries. Speaking of the Areopagite's impact on the development of theology and philosophy in the Medieval period, Gilson says that the Dionysian view "provided christian thinkers with a general framework within which their interpretation of the world could easily take place".<sup>1</sup> We will see that his significance is much greater than that of giving a structure to Western Theology.

He was universally recognized in both the Orthodox and Latin Church. In the former, his influence is perhaps greatest in the thought of the Greek Father, St. John Damascene. This is evident in St. John's insight on the incomprehensibility of the Divine Essence for the human intellect,<sup>2</sup> which is so weak in comparison to God's Light. In the Western Church, consider also his profound impact on Scotus Erigena, who was the first to translate the Dionysian corpus into Latin, Hugh of St. Victor, the author

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1) Etienne Gilson, *The History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 85.

2) St. John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, cf. Bk. 1, ch. xii. (3)

of *The Cloud*, St. Thomas, who wrote a well-known commentary on the Areopagite's *The Divine Names*, St. Bonaventure, who adopts many of his themes, Eckhart, who carries his doctrine further, St. John of the Cross, who popularized the famous stages of the ascent (purification, illumination and union) and countless others.

Not only is he a bridge between Eastern and Latin Christianity, but also between Western and Indian Thought, particularly on the level of theology and mysticism. His theme of the unknowability of God, in the discursive mode of the mind, is also found in the great Vedic Tradition, especially as it is elaborated in the Upanishads. Since it is chiefly this tradition, that Indian Theology in particular and Western Theology in general must dialogue with, the contribution that Pseudo-Dionysius can make is enormous. He is relevant to all ages and traditions. For he is the great teacher, who hands on not a speculative structure, but a mystical doctrine and a method of reaching Wisdom. This Wisdom is not a dry theological system but a living, intimate knowledge of God based on an experiential approach, a relationship with Him, taking place beyond the bounds of sense perception and reason.

Such a method of theology is very important, and especially so in our time when much of Western Theology lacks this experiential foundation. Pseudo-Dionysius has something valuable to teach us about the nature of theology, which is *always* centred on God. For the Areopagite's doctrine is first and foremost a "science of God".<sup>3</sup> Like all genuine knowledge, it has a direct relation to experience, in this case, to his religious or mystical experience. It is, thus, existential in the profoundest sense.

We will discuss the mystical experience of Pseudo-Dionysius on the level of his method, the apophatic way or the *via negativa*. Of course, this does not attain to his own intimate awareness of God's ineffable Essence, which cannot be captured in language,

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3) Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans., C. E. Rolt (London: S. P. C. K.), *Divine Names* I. 8, pp. 61-63; II. 1, pp. 65-67; III. 1, pp. 81-83. Hereafter, *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* will appear as DN and MT respectively.



but it does suggest the way to come to this knowledge and, thus, also a way for theology to speak more adequately of God.

### The divine "darkness"

The Areopagite's religious insights are absolutely central to his thought. For even his metaphysics is a product of his mysticism, because it flows from an awareness of the Divine Nature. His metaphysics is, in a sense, incidental to his mystical doctrine. He shows that God is the Good<sup>4</sup> because He is the Beginning and the Destiny of all. All things exist because of the Good. He is also Being, because He causes all things to be and, thus, is the Source of existence. All creatures must participate in His being to be at all.<sup>5</sup> God is also called Life, because He is the Source of angelic immortality, our existence and also our immortality. He is very Life Himself.<sup>6</sup> This is how Dionysius emphasizes the absolute uniqueness of God's way of existence. He is the Essence of Life but He transcends our life<sup>7</sup>. He is also the Living Wisdom, the very Reality of Truth, the Truth which is known in ecstatic union. He is Wisdom, because He knows Himself and in knowing Himself, He is able to know all things.<sup>8</sup> He is also the Truth, the actuality of Perfect Meaning and intelligibility.

We can predicate all of these attributes of God, but this knowledge, which is on the metaphysical level, does not reach to the Divine Essence. It cannot express the content of God's Essence, for God's essential nature is bound up with His eternal act of being Who He is. This act is unlimited in all senses, and hence is indescribable in its dynamic Reality. It is by treading the Path of negation, the *via negativa*, being drawn into God's Infinite Actual Meaning, beyond positive statements of attribution to the Divine Nature, that we come to the absolute Knowledge of God. Dionysius says of it:

.... the Divinest Knowledge of God, the which is received through Unknowing, is obtained in that com-

4) *Ibid.*, DN IV. 1, pp. 86-87.

5) *Ibid.*, DN V. 5, p. 136.

6) *Ibid.*, DN VI. 1-3, pp. 144-145.

7) *Ibid.*, p. 146.

8) *Ibid.*, DN VII. 1-2, pp. 146-151.

munion which transcends the mind, when the mind, turning away from all things and then leaving even itself behind, is united to the Dazzling Rays, being from them and in them, illumined by the unsearchable depth of Wisdom.<sup>9</sup>

The soul reaches into the Divine Nature and knows It in an unknowing manner; she is made aware of the Divine Impulse, being united to It. She is unable to grasp the Meaning, the Living Wisdom of God's Essence in the Pure Actuality of being Infinite Truth, Possessing total Reality in Himself. We can know it, but we cannot understand it in our limited categories. We can know God in His Way and through Him (which is the only way that we know Him), in His "dazzling" Light. So, we must give up any attempt to grasp God with mere speculative reason. We must rather apprehend Him in His own self-luminosity, which transcends our metaphysical power to contain in thought or language. We must enter into God's Dwelling with Himself, which is beyond Being and beyond all our attempts to name Him.<sup>10</sup> Only the apophatic method suffices to give us some intimation of God's uncircumscribable Nature, but this does not give us a positive content that the intellect can grasp in a clear fashion.

He cannot be named because the mind cannot convey the Boundless Meaning of His nature. All that the soul can do before God is to receive an awareness of His Presence in Vision. She cannot understand what is being known. For God's nature exceeds the limits of our ideas. Concepts are tools through which we extend our understanding, but the tools are fragile, finite things. We cannot know God through them. At best, we can see Him reflected in them. We can and must receive God in and through Him, in His Supreme Concept of Himself, which is His Meaning.

To acquire this Meaning, which is the end toward which 'mystic contemplation' leads, demands that the soul pass beyond sense experience and the operations of the intellect. The understanding must be suspended<sup>11</sup> in order for the Divine Ray o.

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9) *Ibid.*, DN VII. 3, p. 152.

10) *Ibid.*, DN XIII. 3, p. 188.

11) *Ibid.*, MT I, p. 191.

Wisdom to enter the soul's rest and communicate Itself to the intellect and the will in an ineffable way. By going beyond the impressions of the senses, images, forms and the thought or concepts of the mind, the soul is "led upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence".<sup>12</sup> But this darkness is an excess of Light; it is God's infinite meaningfulness, which is a total Mystery to the human intellect. God is a supreme Mystery in Himself, and we try to articulate it but we cannot. It is beyond our capacities of conception and imagination. God dwells in this Superessential Darkness; He is "that One who is beyond all things".<sup>13</sup> If our ideas are useless as aids to grasp Him or His nature, why then do we cling to them? The price for Divine Knowledge is to let go of these. We must plunge into "the Darkness of Unknowing", passing beyond our feeble attempts at understanding, and, thus, giving ourselves completely to Him, we are united to Him. When our faculties are *quiet*, the intellect is elevated to the Vision of God in His "Darkness", in His Boundless Mystery. By letting go of "all knowledge he (the soul) possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding."<sup>14</sup>

### The *via negativa* and 'unknowing'

Again, this knowledge of the Divine Essence can be known but not understood. The soul has it from unitive Vision but lacks God's self-understanding, His grasp of Himself. How God knows Himself is too overpowering for the soul. The infinite intelligibility and simplicity of God's inner truth appear as darkness to the intellect. The intellect cannot make sense of His Essence, especially in the rational mode of knowing. The soul can know the Divine Essence, but not in the sense of a precise understanding, more in the line of an experience whose meaning one intuitively grasps without clearly defining it. One can know God through 'unknowing', that is, by experiencing the Divine Reality in a direct way but without understanding this Reality.

Mystical experience, contemplation, the direct unitive Vision of the Godhead, the Trinity, the absolute in the soul, that is, in the consciousness of the creature, is an experience vastly different

12) *Ibid.*, MT I, p. 192

13) *Ibid.*, MT I, p. 193.

14) *Ibid.*, MT I, p. 194.



from every other experience. It is not human consciousness in the ordinary sense, whether bodily or speculative. Insofar as contemplation constitutes the meaning of being human in its highest sense, it is the most important activity. It is a transcendent level of Truth, It is not reached by any of our usual ways of knowing, such as sensation, imagination or conceptualization in the discursive mode of thought. The mystical life attains a level of understanding, of direct Vision of the Absolute, in a way of consciousness that belongs to God. The soul is brought into God's Stream of Transcendence, the pure Luminosity of God's way of being, which is 'darkness' to her intellect because beyond the range of the soul's conception and other acts of understanding. To "understand" God the soul would have to be God. The way "to be" God is to become united to His inner Truth, which is Himself. And the way to this state of consciousness is through a rejection of sense perception, form and thought all together and a passing into the 'darkness' of the Divine, which is a Light more luminous than all of the stars of the universe combined. Thus, it is as darkness to the soul in the act of unknowing that which is being known.

This darkness, the non-comprehension of what is being experienced, is a condition in which the soul has absolute knowledge or Wisdom from direct exposure to the Divine Source but not an understanding of what is encountered in this state. Thus, to know God is not to know what is indeed known. It is one of the profound paradoxes of the Spiritual Life, which is true in any of the world religious traditions. There is no real contradiction in this situation, because one does know God but does not grasp His intelligibility, nor can one explain the content of mystical experience to some one else. It is similar to someone who perceives an event take place without knowing its context, and hence, not comprehending its significance.

We must make the ascent to God through the medium of the *via negativa*, because God can only be known in His own way and through conditions that are proper to Him. The *via negativa* leads to the *via mystica*. No experience or notion in any way approximates the Reality of God as He is in Himself. That is why one best begins the journey to God by way of the apophatic method. This method is a kind of purification of the intellect and also of the will, for one is centered on God, the destiny toward

which the soul moves. The person has said *yes* to God and His design. The soul is seeking the Source, and this is an important decision of the will. Thus, the apophatic way purifies the soul's faculties and rightly orders them, preparing one for the vision of God. Through the *via negativa*, the soul is led into that unknowing in which the Divine Darkness, God's Brilliance and Glory, is beheld,<sup>15</sup> which is beyond the range of all experience that is bounded by the temporal conditions of earthly life.

The emphasis in the Dionysian method of contemplation is on this unknowing or *nescience*, as Elmer O'Brien<sup>16</sup> calls it, following J. Vanneste. O'Brien says that this *nescience* or unknowing is not ignorance. It is the way God is known, and the only way.<sup>17</sup> It results in a unitive Vision of the Divine, but one is silent before that which defies description. What propels the soul to the mystical heights is this dynamic *nescience*<sup>18</sup> or knowing by unknowing, knowing but not comprehending. Thus, it is not love that unites us to God for Dionysius, as it is for St. Augustine, St. Bernard, St. John of the Cross and countless others. Mystical union with the Source is a passive act of the intellect devoid of its own content. Unknowing, *nescience* or the *via negativa* is an exercise in freeing the intellect from all finite objects in order that the soul may be prepared to receive the Divine Impulse of God's being, which eternally proceeds forth from Him as 'darkness' and then returns to Him. The Impulse coming from the Divine Source is too great for the intellect to perceive unaided. Only grace permits us to have an awareness of It. As the Areopagite says: "We must be transported wholly out of ourselves and given unto God."<sup>19</sup> And this is the work of His grace.

The closer we get to the Source in His eternal and inaccessible Light, the more circumscribed our language and conceptions become in relation to Him. Our thoughts and concepts are too discursive and purely intellectual. This is true of the state of much of our knowledge. But the nearer the soul comes to God,

15) *Ibid.*, MT II, pp. 195-196.

16) Elmer O'Brien, S. J., *The Varieties of Mystic Experience* (New York: Mentor-Omega, 1964), p. 68.

17) *Ibid.*

18) *Ibid.*

19) *Op. Cit.*, DN VII. 1, p. 147.

the more sparing become her utterances, until she is struck dumb before the eternal glory of God.<sup>20</sup> The higher we get in the ascent, the greater becomes our incapacity to express our thoughts and feelings about what we are perceiving of God. Our vision of Truth becomes progressively more unified. We no longer see things simply in their multiplicity, but in their unity in God, the Source.

As the soul continues the climb to God, she is still aware of distinction, of the subject-object relation. But when she arrives at the point where thought itself is left behind, then the soul reaches pure Unity in which she knows herself in this Unity. For then the soul knows herself in God and through His inexpressible Unity. And as Dionysius says, the soul is "at last wholly united with Him Whom words cannot describe".<sup>21</sup> The mind is freed from the constraining limits of mortality and knows the embrace of eternal Bliss, the promise of immortality in the blessedness of Paradise. The soul, thus, has a taste of Beatitude.

To reach the heights of contemplative Vision we must lose ourselves in God. We must give up ourselves; we must renounce our thoughts, for thoughts are what drag us down and bind us to this veil of tears.<sup>22</sup> We are victims of our different moods that pass before the screen of consciousness. We must rather let them go and seek the ineffable Presence of God, Who is always there waiting to lead us into His unitive, infinite domain of being. What Dionysius is exhorting us to is a simple method of freeing ourselves from all thought, imagination and experience. The one "object" that we may concentrate on is the Divine Darkness, the Source in His luminous, blinding Presence in His Unity of inconceivable Essence.

God in Himself, as He eternally is, is beyond our affirmation because He is the underived Cause of all that is, and that

20) *Ibid.*, MT III. p. 198.

21) *Ibid.*, MT III, p. 198.

22) We are not suggesting a program of escapism, nor is the Areopagite. What we trying to show with him is the way to God in the contemplative realm. Rather than an escape, this is a way of great service in the act of witnessing to the most essential Value, which is conducive to our Salvation.



He is beyond negation because of His utter simplicity. He is wholly unlimited and is beyond even the possibility of limitation, affirmation and negation.<sup>23</sup> He *is* or exists in such a way that neither affirmation nor negation can reach his domain of being. We do not exist in comparison to the absolute way in which He does. God's boundlessness prevents us from capturing His Mystery in any system or in any descriptive definition. He is in His own right in a total way.

The method of Pseudo-Dionysius leads us through the 'unknowing' of the intellect in mystical Vision, in which the soul perceives the Divine Essence, the Darkness of the Godhead's awesome brilliance, to the dynamic Presence of God in His Mystery. There, we find God in His eternal Now, His everlasting relation to Himself in the Persons of the Trinity, the eternal act of the Divine being in which He grasps His Identity and is able to love. The soul sees all of this in a unitive relationship to God, which proceeds at the initiative of His grace, but which is encouraged by her response to His invitation. It is God's comprehension of himself, which happens eternally, that the soul meets and in which she participates in a direct act of her being, having been elevated via Divine grace into the unitive Vision of Truth.

There are many ways or methods to come to the experiential knowledge of God. Several of these have been practised for countless centuries in India and from the earliest times in the Church, especially in the great tradition of the Desert Fathers and having developed in the Middle Ages within the context of a thriving monastic culture. Even though this is true, the mystical Vision, culminating in the unitive bond with the Source, a permanent state of God-centered realization, the awareness of His Presence, is yet a grace given to whomsoever God chooses to give it. Methods prepare us; they are a seeking of God, a knocking and God responds by elevating our consciousness to a penetration of His Mystery in "the dazzling obscurity of the Secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of (its) darkness..."<sup>24</sup>

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23) *Ibid.*, MT V, p. 201

24) *Ibid.*, MT I, p. 191.

### 'Deification'

Pseudo-Dionysius shows us that theology must ultimately be grounded on realization of God's inner light, an intimate union with Him, a near identification with His eternal way of existence. This is what Dionysius means by 'deification', which is a common term in all of his works or is at least what he is attempting to communicate. This notion is integral to the Spirituality of the Orthodox Church, although it is equally attested to in the Latin Church and expressed in the theme of the mystical marriage, which many mystics elaborate in great detail. This is especially true of Spanish Mysticism. 'Deification' is the ultimate situation of being one with God's essential consciousness and Truth. Theology, in its rational mode, is addicted to discursiveness, an overabundance of reasoning from premise to conclusion, as if Wisdom could be attained simply by this approach. Furthermore, the attributes that man conceives God of having, which are taken from Scripture, His effects in history, such as Being, Goodness, Mercy and many others are derived from the way in which God has acted toward us. These positive attributes, however, do not touch, reveal or contain the Divine Essence, the Truth or God. The Divine Essence is the Truth of God Himself, as He is in Himself. To reach God as He is in Himself, the soul must realize first that God alone holds the key which unlocks the Secret of His Reality. We are not only dependent upon Him for our life but also for our eternal Happiness.

One cannot extort this knowledge of the living Truth, of God in Himself, the Source in His sourceness. This is the knowledge of His essential whatness, His Secret act of being Who He is. To have this knowledge one must be united to Him in that divinizing elevation of the intellect to the celestial Heights of God in the super-dazzling Presence of His ultimate Reality. Again, this absolute knowledge, which is Wisdom from an experiential awareness of His being, must arise from the purification of the understanding in the Divine Darkness of God's everlasting, luminous comprehension of Himself.

'Deification' means that the soul has become like unto the Divine or has been 'deified' insofar as the intellect and the will are so totally one with God that the soul shares the Impulse of God's eternal inner life. One is, thus, 'deified' through direct

participation in what God is in Himself, that which is always hidden from creation. 'Deification' in no way means that the actual, metaphysical distinction between God and creature is overcome. Such is not the case and can never be so. Many mystics in several traditions caution that we guard against making this claim of actually becoming God. We become God-like only. There is always the unbridgeable ontological gap between God and the soul. God in His great mercy extends His invitation to us to share His unending life, but not to take His place. We have our Beatitude from Him. It is a terrible conceit or vanity to claim that one is God. Not only does such a statement lack humility, it also lacks truth. The Areopagite's doctrine does not lead in that direction.

The mystical state itself, which is a permanent acquisition once seen, holds the key to Truth. God in His Trinity is the content of the Divine TO BE, how He is in Himself and how we can participate or 'be' this with Him. We can and must have unitive life with God, that which reveals the celestial strings of the Divine Harp, the angelic music of God's everlasting Reality.

Furthermore, the mystical state is like the all-encompassing wind in the forest, which surrounds one on every side, revealing a Presence that speaks just in being present. To be in God as a candle is one with the Sun in being held up to it, to be 'deified' is to be completely absorbed (yet retaining one's separate identity, founded on a distinction of substance) into God's inner Truth, being united to Him and seeing everything in God's Vision, in His understanding, but limited by your lack of capacity to receive so much of the Divine Light, the Reality of Who God is. 'Deification' is a transformation of the one who faces God in prayer, the contemplative life beyond the reason. It is like being in the presence of a great Light that again surrounds us and then slowly allows itself to grow stronger and stronger, permitting us to become accustomed to it. All of a sudden, the Light increases its brilliance to an unlimited degree and we are penetrated on every side and through and through with the radiance of God's unutterable glory. This is something of what Pseudo-Dionysius means when he speaks of 'deification' or divinization. It is a knowledge that is open to all, and is the chief need of our age as of every other. It is what is most befitting

the Church's supernatural dignity, what She is entrusted to teach. It is also what theology has for too long neglected, until comparatively recent times. Let us conclude this discussion of the Dionysian mystical doctrine with a little poem. It is also mystical and should speak for itself.

### O Divine Touch

Some poets in tranquil certainty  
dare seek the nature true of poetry.  
What course hence leads to that  
infrequent land rarely traversed  
by modernity?  
Finite knowledge takes not  
the place of Wisdom  
sublime in His flowing Stillness.

To delight the soul  
innocent of expectation  
free of worldly machinations  
wells up the Torrent Divine  
on rush of the very Presence  
Who stills the lingering doubt  
taking His place with surety.

Vast host of wind chimes flutter  
with ease, a music sweet  
beauteous to the unversed ear  
announcing the Celestial Visitor  
true Source of all Being  
Who lights the Way  
with awe and fear  
answering the eternal question  
for those willing to hear.

Fordham University  
September, 1978

Wayne Teasdale



# The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Early-Christian Tradition

## Position of the Question

Much has been written concerning the attitude of the early Christian Tradition towards ambient philosophies and the religious traditions and practices Christians of the first centuries encountered. Though the subject has been renewed in recent years in the context of the much broader religious pluralism characteristic of our times, the question remains fundamentally the same: what was the position of the early fathers with regard to the possibility for non-Christians of attaining salvation, and how conducive could their own religious tradition and practice be to this salvation? I have indicated elsewhere<sup>1</sup> that the data of the Christian Tradition are ambiguous on these points: while a negative attitude is often adopted and derogatory statements often made against non-Christian religious practices, currents are not missing which witness to a positive approach. Some of the writers of the second and third centuries, in particular St Justin, St Ireneus and Clement of Alexandria, are prominent representatives of such a positive approach. I have tried to show that their open-minded view is based on a theology of salvation history the various stages of which are conceived as distinct manifestations of the logos – theology which, though the name is not used, correspond, to a great extent to the recent theology of anonymous Christianity.<sup>2</sup> This theology rests on the premise of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate; it falls or stands by it. Yet to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as such and for its own sake recent literature about the early Tradition has paid much less attention than to the consequences deriving from it.<sup>3</sup>

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1) See *Jesus Christ and His Spirit*, pp. 150–153.

2) See *Jesus Christ and His Spirit*, pp. 3–20.

3) The tables of A. Grillmeier's important work on *Christ in Christian Tradition* have no entry on the uniqueness of Christ.

This, perhaps, is due to the fact that often the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is simply taken for granted. It is so not only in works on early Christian theologies but in recent Christological literature as well. It is worthwhile to observe that among the many books on Christology written in recent years, hardly any treats the question explicitly: H. Küng's *On Being a Christian* is among the rare works in which the question is explicitly dealt with.<sup>4</sup> Admittedly in the minds of many authors the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is understood and implicitly stated in many ways. Nevertheless, in the context of the recent encounter of religions and of the new questioning it is leading to, it needs to be treated and for its own sake; for, from a Christian view-point it is the one factor which commands and governs every attitude towards the reality of religious pluralism. An effort is made here to enquire into the mind of the early Tradition on the question of the uniqueness of Christ. Is it taken for granted by the Fathers and, if so, why? On what ground is it affirmed and what theological significance is given to the affirmation? How is it proposed, and under which theological concepts? What is the theological vision that sustains the affirmation or theological framework that calls for it?

Before entering into the subject, it is well to define the terms, especially to clarify what is meant here when we speak of the "uniqueness" of Jesus Christ. This uniqueness is understood not only relatively but absolutely. It refers not only to the fact that Jesus Christ is different from other founders of religions and the divine manifestation which takes place in him different from all others. Such a relative difference is of course understood, but is not in itself the subject of theological enquiry but rather of the science of comparative religion. As every human person is different from any other and in this sense unique, so is every religious founder and every religious tradition. Comparative religion rightly brings out the specific character and thus the uniqueness of each religious tradition, with a view to comparing them and eventually to conclude that each has its own beauty and value and that none is reducible to another; this is its task and its function. The uniqueness which Christian theology traditionally claims for Jesus Christ is, however, of another order,

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4) See H. Küng, *On Being a Christian*, pp. 89-116.

absolute: Jesus Christ is understood to be uniquely unique, inasmuch as in him is found the fulness of divine revelation and the decisive intervention of God in the world for the salvation of men. Understandably the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ is open to different interpretations. It has often been understood in an exclusive manner, as though it precluded the recognition of other divine manifestations and interventions in history; but it can and has also been conceived in an inclusive manner. By this is meant the recognition of divine manifestations and revelations in non-Christian religious traditions which, however, are viewed as essentially related to the Christ-event and owing their value to this relatedness. The recent theology of anonymous Christianity, as well as the ancient theology of the universal presence and action of the logos, are attempts at presenting the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ in an inclusive way. An enquiry into the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Christian Tradition would have for its task not only to show that this is constantly affirmed but also to distinguish the distinct manners in which it is conceived at various epochs by different theological currents under different circumstances.

It is not possible to attempt this immense task here. All that can be done is to indicate what seems to be the basic fundamental tenet, regarding the unique significance of Jesus Christ, which constantly underlies the theological thinking of various authors as it also pertains to the core of their Christian experience and faith. This general approach to the subject will be dealt with in the first part of this paper. The second part will, by way of illustration, examine more closely how the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is conceived and presented by one of the important early writers. For this I have chosen Irenaeus of Lyons, not without reason. Irenaeus has rightly been called the first theologian of salvation history; his theology of the universal presence and action of the logos and of the various stages of his manifestation to the world provides a solid theological framework on which to build a Christian theological world-view. Irenaeus can thus be considered as representative of the Christian approach, and has in fact exercised a lasting influence.

## I. Patristic Approach to the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ

The first impression one gathers when reading the early Christian writers is that the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is simply taken for granted by them. It is not discussed, let alone doubted, but rather everywhere presupposed. It is asserted only in the face of contradiction, obviously because in the understanding of the Fathers it is the underlying principle of the Christian experience and message. This is also why, when it needs to be asserted, it is asserted in unambiguous terms. The soteriological principle constantly underlies such affirmations: Jesus Christ is *the* Saviour of the world; "he became Man that we might be divinized"; he assumed all that is human in order that all of it might be saved. "What has not been assumed is not redeemed",—as it is put negatively the better to show the incongruity of all denial and its incompatibility with the Christian sense.

In this the early Christian Tradition means to abide by the New Testament message which it takes at its face value. Did not Peter declare in his early preaching that, besides Jesus Christ, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4, 12). And Paul declared with the same clarity: "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus..." (1 Tim 2, 5). The fundamental Christian experience, as witnessed to by the New Testament and understood by the Fathers, does not seem to consist only, or even primarily, in the fact that I am saved in Jesus Christ, but that all men are saved in him; he is not only my Saviour but the Saviour of the world. I say "not even primarily", because the experience which the individual person makes of being saved in Jesus Christ inserts itself in a universal order of salvation, given in anticipation. It is this universal order, established by God and realized by him in Jesus Christ, which commands Paul's speculation on the primacy of Christ over heavenly powers as it also directs the insistence with which both Paul and John, not to mention other N. T. writers, stress the identification of Jesus Christ, Son incarnate, with all men in their concrete sinful condition, and the mysterious, but real, insertion of all men in the risen Lord. All this equally forms the core of the theological thinking of the early post-biblical tradition on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, as it is the necessary foundation for the soteriological argument



which otherwise would lose its validity and its strength. The Fathers were thus led to stress the "social aspects of dogma" (de Lubac), all in relation to Jesus Christ considered as unique: creation, re-creation and eschatological salvation were successive stages of salvation history, all being centred on Jesus Christ; nor was any one stage of salvation history to be conceived as admitting dispersion or fragmentation. A vision imposed itself in which everything was unified in Jesus Christ according to the mind of the divine plan itself. Let us examine this vision in some details.

The Fathers loved to contemplate God creating humanity as a whole. "God", says Ireneus, "in the beginning of time planted the vine of the human race; he loved this human race and purposed to pour out his Spirit upon it and to give it the adoption of sons" (*Adv. Haer.*, passim)—in which is seen how the creation of the human race is itself understood to be in view of Jesus Christ in whom all men receive their adoptive sonship. The whole of human nature, one and in which all men share, is compared with the lost sheep of the Gospel which the Good Shepherd brings back to the fold. "The Fathers seemed to witness its birth, to see it live, grow, develop, as a single being. With the first sin it was this being, whole and entire, which fell away, which was driven out of Paradise and sentenced to a bitter exile until the time of its redemption. And when Christ at last appeared, coming as the 'one bridegroom', his bride once again was the 'whole human race'."<sup>5</sup>

The principle of the unity of the human race is found by the Fathers in the fact, attested by the book of Genesis, that man is made by God in his own image: the same image of God is found in all men because human nature itself is made in that image; indeed, as Gregory of Nyssa puts it, "the whole of human nature from the first man to the last is but one image of him who is" (*De hominis opificio*, 16). The creation of man in the image of God forged the link between the doctrine of divine unity and that of human unity, as it also made intelligible the unity of men's salvation in Jesus Christ, the image of God given to men. Ireneus dwells on this correspondence: "There is but one

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5) H. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, pp. 3-4.

God the Father, and one logos the Son, and one Spirit, and one salvation only for those who believe in him.... There is but one salvation as there is but one God.... There is one only Son who fulfils the will of the Father, and one only human race in which the mysteries of God are fulfilled" (*Adv. Haer.* 4, 6, 7; 4, 9, 3; 4, 9, 5).

"In these conditions, all infidelity to the divine image which man bears in him, every breach with God, is at the same time a disruption of human unity. It cannot eliminate the natural unity of the human race—the image of God, tarnished though it may be, is indestructible—but it ruins that spiritual unity which, according to the Creator's plan, should be so much the closer in proportion as the supernatural union of man with God is the more completely effected."<sup>6</sup> Consequently too, the redemption, being a work of restoration, will appear by that very fact as the recovery of lost unity—the recovery of supernatural unity of man with God, but equally of the unity of men among themselves. In Jesus Christ God raises up again man who was lost by gathering together once more his scattered members, so restoring his own image.

To unite what was divided: such is the work of Christ. Such is already the effect of the incarnation, for Christ from the very first moment of his existence virtually bears all men within himself: *erat in Christo Iesu omnis homo*. "The Word did not merely take a human body; his incarnation was not a simple *corporatio*, but, as St Hilary says, a *concorporatio*. He incorporated himself in our humanity, and incorporated it in himself. *Universitatis nostrae caro est factus*. In assuming a human nature, it is human nature that he united to himself, that he enclosed in himself, and it is the latter, whole and entire, that in some sort he uses as a body. *Naturam in se universae carnis assumpsit*. Whole and entire he will bear it then to Calvary, whole and entire he will raise it from the dead, whole and entire he will save it. Christ the redeemer does not offer salvation merely to each one; he effects, he is himself the salvation of the whole, and for each one salvation consists in a personal ratification of his original 'belonging' to Christ, so that he be not cast out, cut off from this Whole."<sup>7</sup>

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6) *Ibid.*, p. 6.

7) *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

In a celebrated passage Cyril of Alexandria exposes this whole doctrine of the incorporation of the entire human race in the person of Jesus Christ and of its inclusion in the mystery of his return to the Father. He writes; "Not in vain does John assert that the Word came and dwelt among us, for in this way he teaches us the great mystery that we are all in Christ and that the common personality of man is brought back to life by his assuming of it. The New Adam is so called because he acquires for the common nature all that pertains to happiness and glory, just as the old Adam acquired what pertains to its corruption and shame. Through the medium of one the Word came to dwell in all, so that the only Son of God being established in power, his dignity should be shed upon the whole human race by the holiness of the Spirit: and thus should be verified in each one of us that saying of Scripture: "I said you are Gods and sons of the Most High." ... The Word dwells in us, in that one temple he took through us and of us, that we should possess all things in him and he should bring us all back to the Father in one Body" (*In Joannem*, I, 1).

From what has just been exposed it will be seen that the Christian vision of the Patristic tradition forms an organic whole, the various parts of which are inter-related and inter-dependent. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is an integral part of this mosaic, but not any part; for it is the key to the understanding of the entire vision, as the one Christ himself is the form of the human race and the principle of intelligibility of the cosmos. With the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, Son of God incarnate and Redeemer, the whole edifice of the Christian world-view, as traditionally understood, stands or falls. In this sense the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is not merely a theologoumenon, but the corner-stone of the entire edifice of faith. To question it is to question the Christian faith itself as perceived by the Tradition of the early centuries. The central position occupied by Jesus Christ, unique and universal, is brought out with the help of theological concepts, among which the second and last Adam, the new man and the new creation, and others, occupy a prominent place; but, more fundamental than the various categories by which it is expressed, the mystery of Christ and of the Christ-event, with its cosmic dimension and

influence, stands at the core of the Christian experience and doctrine.

This, however, is precisely where many questions can be raised and have in fact often been raised. The construction seems too compact and the edifice too monolithic to belong to the realm of religious faith; the claim too great to be acceptable, all the more so as—as appears more clearly today—it seems to be belied by the reality of religious pluralism. It has often been suggested that the traditional Christian vision is less the product of Jesus Christ or even the New Testament than a Christian transposition of philosophical speculations encountered by the first centuries of Christianity. Platonic realism, a stoic concept of universal being, gnostic speculation, as for instance the myth of the *anthropossôtez*, are mentioned as likely influences.

The attitude of the Fathers towards these and other philosophical speculations must be correctly evaluated, and the true origin of their doctrinal position discovered. It is true that they did not hesitate to have recourse to philosophical ideas prevalent in their time and to put them to use in the exposition of their own doctrine. They did this in an eclectic manner, not being bound to any particular philosophical system but rather gleaning here and there whatever seemed helpful for the presentation of their own position. But the source of their speculation is not to be found in those philosophical considerations which only served as instruments; it sprang entirely from a keen realization of the demands of Christianity as they found them inscribed in the New Testament, the primacy, universal mediatorship and High Priesthood of Jesus Christ in particular. So they did use Stoic ideas in order to bring out the full import of the Pauline metaphor of the body and its members, and platonic concepts to interpret with accuracy the Epistle to the Hebrews. They borrowed to a large extent from the great “pagan” philosophers whom they held in high esteem, but, as Christopher Dawson has remarked,<sup>8</sup> if we would understand patristic thought it is to St John and St Paul we must go back.

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8) Ch. Dawson *Progress and religion*



Nor did they by some sort of easy accommodation accept to reduce the Christian message which they found inscribed in the N. T. to the speculative ideals of the philosophies they used. The one was vastly different from the others; and, while making use of them for their own purpose, the Fathers did not fail to mark the difference. To give one example, the *logos* speculation of the Stoa and of Philo could help to emphasise the cosmic significance of Jesus Christ, Word incarnate, but Jesus Christ and the doctrine of St John in the Prologue could not be reduced to the Stoic *logos*. The story of Arianism is that of an unlucky attempt to reduce what the Fathers understood to be the revealed truth on the Word Incarnate to the idea of an intermediary being manifested in the flesh for which philosophical speculation could make room. This accommodation ruined the Christian message of men's divinization in the Son of God made man, as the Fathers well perceived, and hence they spent their energy combatting the attempt.

This goes to show that caution is needed before accusing the Fathers of having "hellenized" the Christian message. If by Hellenization is meant the use of hellenistic speculation and ideas, wherever these were found conducive to conveying the Christian message, the Fathers have undoubtedly and deliberately hellenized. They did so out their persuasion, which we share to-day, that the Christian message must be incarnated in human culture and "contextualized". They received the message not as a dead letter but as a living word; they undertook it as a task. If, on the contrary, by Hellenization is meant that the Fathers reduced the Christian message to speculative ideas of ambient philosophies or construed it into them, nothing seems more remote from the truth. They were keenly aware that the message and Jesus Christ at its core could not be reduced to anything foreign, as it originated in the unprecedented initiative which God had taken in him. Their faith in Jesus Christ, not any philosophical speculation, was thus the source of inspiration and the guiding force of their doctrine. If unity is a constant pre-occupation of their doctrine—unity of God, unity of human nature and of the human race, unity of salvation and of human destiny—the reason is that Jesus Christ, unique in himself, is at the heart of their thinking as the unifying factor of all things and the union of men and the world with God.

## II. A Test Case: Irenaeus of Lyons

The theology of Irenaeus of Lyons, and in particular his theory of the recapitulation of all things and all men in Jesus Christ the God-man, can serve as a striking illustration of the patristic unified vision. It powerfully centres all things on Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, in whom God has made himself visible, who throughout human history "rehearsed" his coming in the flesh through various manifestations, accustoming men to himself and being accustomed to them till finally he came. His coming in the flesh sums up all things in him; he is the head of creation as he is of re-creation, first intended by God while he is realized in the last times. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ, conceived as the cosmic Christ with universal significance as the principle of intelligibility of all things and universal influence on them all, is the driving force of Irenaeus's thought. Irenaeus proposes an account of the Christian faith making use of all the elements of the tradition that has gone before him, organising them in a total perspective to demonstrate against the Gnostics of his time that there is but one divine purpose in both creation and redemption. Covering the whole history of salvation, he "constructs his theology round the concept of the recapitulation of all things in the God-man; it is the same Word by whom all things were created who comes to recover all things in the Incarnation".<sup>9</sup>

For Irenaeus, then, the Incarnation is the key to the entire history of salvation.<sup>10</sup> It is the end and the goal of a process of God drawing near to man and man to God begun right at creation but reaching its perfection only in Jesus Christ. It is the Word of God who from the beginning formed Adam in his own image (*Adv. Haer.* IV, 20, 1). At all times the Word has been present to the man whom he formed and who, though a sinner, continues to belong to him. All the theophanies or divine manifestations recorded in the Old Testament are logophanies or manifestations of the Logos, "holding converse with men and living in the midst of them": "the Word of God was preparing the way and accustoming himself to our manner of life; at this time he was showing us beforehand in a figure what was to come to pass" (*Demonstr.* 45).

9) J. Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, p. 167

10) See G. Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation*.

Ireneus emphasises the continuity between these earlier instances of the Word's presence among men and the Incarnation.<sup>11</sup> From the beginning all his comings were ordained to his decisive coming in the flesh. In the incarnation the process of familiarisation of the Word to men reaches its climax. In its decisiveness it is the habituation of God to man and of man to God. This is what is realised in Jesus Christ and in him only: "The only-begotten Word of God, who is always present to the race of men, united and mingled with the being he has formed, in accordance to the Father's good pleasure, having become flesh is himself Jesus Christ our Lord . . . . Thus there is one God the Father . . . . and one Christ Jesus our Lord, who comes by a universal dispensation (*dispositio*) and recapitulates all things in himself. But in 'all things' man also is comprised, a creature of God, therefore he recapitulates man in himself" (*Adv. Haer.* III, 16, 6).

But, the continuity between the previous comings of the Word and his coming in the flesh notwithstanding, the Incarnation in which the entire process comes to a climax, brings with it something entirely new: "What did the Lord bring when he came? Know this, that he brought something completely new, for he brought himself (*omnem novitatem attulit seipsum afferens*)" (*Adv. Haer.* IV, 34, 1). The incarnation is thus the heart and climax of Ireneus's vision of the history of salvation, and it is this insight, as expressed in his doctrine of recapitulation, which must now be examined more closely.

In its first meaning, known to secular use, recapitulation means summarising. Ireneus applies this meaning to the incarnation: Christ takes up and summarises in himself all mankind. Paul himself had used this meaning in Eph. 1, 10: "to sum up all things in Christ"; but he added that God "made him (Christ) the head over all things" (Eph. 1, 22). Ireneus takes up this sense: all things find in Christ their unity. Finally, also by derivation from head, recapitulation can mean 'review' or 'repetition'. These various senses of the term convey distinct aspects of Ireneus's concept of recapitulation.

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11) See A. Houssiau, *La Christologie de Saint Irénée* p. 10.

contributing thereby in various ways to bringing out the unique significance of Jesus Christ in the mystery of the incarnation.

In the first of the senses mentioned, that of 'summary', Ireneus notes that Christ sums up in himself all that existed before him, the "ancient forming (*plasmatio*) of Adam" (*Adv. Haer.* III, 18, 7) especially. Ireneus makes the point that the humanity with which the Word united himself is identical with that of Adam: "If the Lord had become incarnate in accordance with some different dispensation, and had taken flesh of another substance, he could not then have recapitulated men in himself, nor indeed could he even have been called flesh... (*Adv. Haer.* V, 14, 2). Furthermore, the Word incarnate combines in his own single person every aspect of the humanity which he purposes to bring back to God. His sacrifice is seen as summing up and consummating all the sacrifices which preceded and were types of his. He is the fulfilment of everything which has gone before, summing up and consummating in his own self the concrete, historical reality of human nature. Likewise he reproduces in himself the various stages of the life of the individual human being, summing up these also in himself: "He passed through every age: having become an infant among the infants, he sanctified the infants; as a little child among little children he sanctifies those who are of that age;... as a youth among youths he becomes an example to youth, and sanctifies them in the Lord" (*Adv. Haer.* II, 22, 4). In all these instances, the idea of 'recapitulation' serves to demonstrate, according to the soteriological principle, how fully the Word of God has been incarnated in Adam's race in Jesus Christ. Had he not assumed all that is human, human reality would not have found full salvation in him alone.

The second sense of recapitulation, that of 'head', corroborates the idea of universal salvation in Jesus Christ: the human race in its numerical totality is substantially saved in him who is its head. J. Danielou observes how Ireneus moves from the first sense of recapitulation to the second: "It is because the Word has summed up in himself man, formed by God, that, in virtue of the power which belongs to him, he who is already head of the whole creation becomes in a new sense head of the human race, drawing everything to himself, and in him concentrating all



the generations of mankind".<sup>12</sup> In his capacity as head, Christ realizes in his own person the salvation of all the long ages of mankind; this recapitulation, moreover, extends to all nations: "it is he who has recapitulated in himself all the people spread from the time of Adam, and all languages, and the race of men, Adam himself included" *Adv. Haer.*: III, 22, 3). Nor does this recapitulation refer merely to past generations, for the glorified Christ is head of the Church and the source of all spiritual life: "These things he recapitulated in himself; uniting man to the Spirit, and placing the Spirit within man, he himself became the head of the Spirit, while also giving the Spirit to be the head of man; for it is through that (Spirit) that we see and speak" (*Adv. Haer.* V. 20, 2). Finally, recapitulation in Jesus Christ, Word incarnate, extends to the entire universe, both spiritual and physical: Ireneus sees a parable of the universality of Christ's saving action in the four branches of the Cross. By virtue of this recapitulation, viz. the union of all things under his sole authority and cosmic influence, Christ is Universal King.

J. Danielou points to a third element in the 'recapitulation' concept of Ireneus. "The humanity which Christ takes upon himself as a concrete actuality in all its fulness, and which he unites in himself by a numerical summation, is also a humanity which has fallen into the power of the devil. Hence the Word comes to seek that which was lost, to recover from Satan that which had been stolen. Recapitulation is thus a winning back, a new beginning, the inauguration of a new creation, or rather the re-creating of the one single creature.... This aspect is inseparable from the previous two, but it adds an essential feature: incarnation is redemption<sup>13</sup>". The Word comes to 'recapitulate' that which was lost. The act of recovery is the reason for the incarnation, but incarnation is the condition of redemption. Recovery in Jesus Christ is the recovery of human nature and of all historical individual human persons, Adam himself included, for Christ's victory means that he enters into possession of everything which belonged to him. Recapitulation is thus presented as restoration of the position which obtained at the origin of mankind: the first [Adam became Satan's prisoner; Christ is the

12) J. Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* p. 176

13) *Ibid.*, p. 178.

Second Adam, Adam's counterpart, who succeeds where the first had failed. Recapitulation thus denotes the exact reversal of Adam in Christ: "Because in Adam, who was the first to be formed, all of us were tied and bound by death through his disobedience, it was right that through the obedience of him who was made man for us we should be released from death; and, because death reigned over the flesh, . . . our Lord took that which was formed in the beginning as his means of entering the flesh, so that he might . . . conquer by Adam that which by Adam had stricken us down" (*Demonstr.* 31-32).

### By Way of Conclusion

It is time to ask what the patristic tradition, outlined here rapidly, has to tell us as we submit the uniqueness of Jesus Christ to new theological enquiry in the context of present-day religious pluralism. This context is new in so far as religious pluralism has taken on much greater proportions than it had in the time of the Fathers, especially through recent contacts and dialogue with Eastern religious traditions. It is not, however, entirely new, for thinking Christians of the early centuries did encounter, as so much patristic writing testifies, the philosophies and religious ideas and practices of their time. In fact, those centuries represent the first, and in that sense the most decisive encounter between the Christian message and a human culture in all its aspects; in many ways they may serve as model for the larger dialogue which is taking place today between Christianity and the religious traditions of the world.

One point should be clear as regards the patristic attitude to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ: it is the corner stone of the whole edifice of Christian faith, everywhere implied in the elaboration of doctrine. Nor can it be said to have in the mind of the Fathers any other source than the manner in which they read and interpreted the revealed word of the New Testament. This is not to suggest that they read the New Testament blindly without attempting to search for and to expose its inner significance. They found the reason for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the very nature and exigencies of the incarnational economy of salvation manifested in him. If, as they believed, the Word had become man in Jesus Christ, it was clear that this event could



not but be one and have universal, cosmic implications and repercussions. The mystery of the Incarnation, correctly and fully understood, necessarily led to unavoidable consequences with regard to the significance of Jesus Christ for the entire human race and the whole cosmos in their relationship with God. It imposed a pattern of unity upon the entire history of salvation.

It is important to distinguish when studying the Fathers—as also in present theological thinking—between the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and of Christianity. The Fathers held very divergent opinions with regard to the mystery of the Church; their views on the need of belonging to the Church for salvation were often narrow. This was sometimes due to too monolithic a manner of conceiving the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church, resulting in a Church-centred theology which we find impossible to hold today. But the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and that of the Church were not put by the Fathers on one and the same level, nor did they have the same significance. The one was an immediate implication of the mystery of the incarnation, and was due to the demands of the incarnational economy of salvation; the other pertained to the order of the God-appointed means by which the Christ-event remains present and operative for all generations and in all places. The one uniqueness was absolute, the other relative. If the Fathers were sometimes too exclusive on the relative plane, leaving little or no room for substitutive means of the presence and operation of the Christ-event, this does not in any way discredit their thinking on the uniqueness of the Christ-event itself which belonged to another order: it pertained immediately to their faith-persuasion. This means that, while we may have and have in fact good reasons to differ from some traditional Church-centred theological opinions—for which we can offer substitutive models—the highly Christocentric theology of the Fathers continues to have something to tell us. We must ask whether Christo-centrism is not a demand imposed on Christian theology by the experience of the Christian faith itself.

Is the door then open to a Christian theology which would be theocentric but not Christocentric at the same time? This question is not equivalent to asking whether other religious

traditions can be said to contain genuine divine revelations and to be providential means for men's salvation. For this tenet can be held within a Christocentric view of the history of salvation: the other religious traditions will then be seen as essentially related to Jesus Christ and the Christ-event, from which they derive, in a mysterious manner, their significance and their saving power. On the contrary, a non-Christocentric theology would tend to do away with this essential relatedness and thereby with the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Other religious traditions would be held salvific in their own right, independently of Jesus Christ, Word Incarnate. The unity of the divine plan, as traditionally conceived by Christian theology, would be destroyed. It is not within the scope of this paper to answer the question, beyond stating that the Fathers of the Church would not, on ground of their faith-persuasion, have been able to subscribe to this possibility. But, while they would have accepted no compromise with regard to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, their understanding of his uniqueness is inclusive rather than exclusive, or at least is open to an inclusive interpretation.

Vidya Jyoti  
Delhi - 110054

J. Dupuis